

What's next to preserve the linguistic richness of Indigenous Peoples?

Beyond the International Year of Indigenous Languages

Alexandra Tomaselli, L. Mariana Olvera
Colin

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This year, 2019, marks the [International Year of Indigenous Languages](#). Based on the United Nations (UN) General Assembly resolution [71/178](#), it represents a massive effort to finally raise awareness on the invaluable richness of Indigenous languages.

This initiative is primarily led by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), but it involves all the UN bodies directly dealing with Indigenous Peoples' rights (e.g., the [UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues](#), which was the primary convener; the [Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#); and the [Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)) as well as a number of other Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations, governments, academia, civil society organizations, and private sector enterprises that may wish to celebrate Indigenous languages by carrying out related [events](#). A [decade of Indigenous languages](#) may be launched as a follow-up. This would be of utmost importance because, although UNESCO estimates Indigenous languages to number at approximately 7,000, they are, at the same time, [in danger](#).

Linguicism and Linguistic Human Rights

[Language is a fundamental characteristic of our identity](#): it not only allows us to communicate with each other, but is also an expression and an identifier of our culture and background, as well as the main vehicle for transmitting culture down through the generations. However, language may also serve as a sort of [signaling point, making the speakers an easy target for discrimination](#). This holds particularly true for those who have a mother tongue different from the national language, e.g., linguistic minorities and Indigenous Peoples.

This form of language discrimination is what [Skutnabb-Kangas calls *linguicism*](#). The author defines this concept as a form of discrimination based on the spoken language similarly to other forms of *-isms* such as racism, sexism, classism, ethnicism, and ageism. She explains how *linguicism* creates unequal power relationships for different groups that live in a State, e.g., as mentioned, linguistic minorities and Indigenous Peoples. In today's multicultural and multilingual societies, the presence of *linguicism* and the lack of Linguistic Human Rights (LHRs) and their enforcement can ultimately lead to power asymmetries and can culturally impoverish

such groups and deny them equal access to education and job opportunities. This is why linguistic rights are gaining momentum.

Indeed, the lack of LHRs encourages assimilation and loss of cultural diversity. It is commonly argued that a “nation” needs a common language, and it is often believed that language diversity can cause imbalances and further conflicts. Moreover, it is believed that, by granting LHRs, minorities or Indigenous Peoples might strive not only for autonomy, but also for independence, thereby causing the disintegration of the State and exacerbating social tensions. In addition, Indigenous languages may often be perceived as a setback to modernization. And, national languages do serve as efficient and effective instruments to guarantee a unique and common communication within a State, and thus provide for a number of public services, e.g., the public administration and the education system.

However, language unification is often achieved through education in the majority language, creating, consequently, a high rate of failure among the minority or Indigenous language mother tongues. Educational programs that are organized and held in the majority language not only foresee the teaching of such language, but also transmit to the pupils the ontology and the epistemology of the majority culture. This transmission may result in a shift in the ways persons belonging to linguistic minorities or Indigenous Peoples know and think, which would then be mainly controlled by the newly acquired language and culture, and could ultimately lead to further assimilation and, unconsciously, to less resistance to the cultural domination of the majority groups. [Phillipson describes this mechanism as “linguistic imperialism”](#), which is one of the key components of other forms of imperialism. Even where there are programs of bilingual education in place, they ultimately tend to fail. This failure can be observed from [Chile](#) to [Australia](#).

Language protection through LHRs may thus be one of the keys to prevent conflicts and create a sense of unity by creating a proportionate use of the main languages for official purposes, as is the case in many countries (e.g., Bolivia, Ecuador, India, and Paraguay). The protection of languages encourages cultural diversity and integration and avoids linguisticism; together with cultural and bio-diversity, it is ultimately in the interest of all humankind.

Beyond the International Year of Indigenous Languages

Indigenous languages not only represent an immense and invaluable part of the world's cultural richness and act as the main vehicle for the intergenerational transmission of a culture's (often, oral) traditions and knowledge, but also serve other noble purposes. Few know that Indigenous Native American soldiers served as [Code Talkers](#) (mainly, Navajos) during the Second World War and thus provided the [American army with indecipherable encryptions](#) to transmit vital information on and to the battlefield.

How can thus we protect these invaluable languages beyond this International Year and the potential decade of Indigenous Languages?

In addition to the well-known international (individual) human rights standards (e.g., [UDHR](#), [ICCPR](#), [ICESCR](#), [ICERD](#), [CEDAW](#), [CRC](#) and [others](#)), and the UNESCO conventions (e.g., [Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions](#), the [Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage](#), and [others](#)) three ad hoc Indigenous rights instruments may provide further guidance to protect Indigenous languages. They are the [International Labour Organization \(ILO\) Convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries of 1989](#) (see its arts. 12, 14, 26, 27, 28, 30.2, and 31), the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007 – UNDRIP](#) (see its arts. 13, 14, 15, 16), and the [American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – ADRIP](#) (see its arts. 6, 13.3, 14, 15, and 17.2). These international instruments, for instance, foresee that Indigenous Peoples have the right to establish their own educational institutions and facilities (art.27.3, ILO Convention 169; art.14.1, UNDRIP; art.15.3 ADRIP); Indigenous children shall be put in the position to learn to read and write in their own language (art.28.1, ILO Convention 169; art.14.3, UNDRIP, which extends this right to all indigenous individuals; art.15.1 ADRIP). Likewise, Indigenous Peoples shall be able to become fluent in the national language or in one of the official languages of the State (art.28.2, ILO Convention 169), also to guarantee their right to a fair trial and thus be able to take legal proceedings, take part in them, understand them and be understood (art.12 ILO Convention 169; art.13.2 UNDRIP; art.14.4 ADRIP). Other measures that States shall put in place are, e.g., the inclusion of Indigenous cultures into the curricula of the national educational systems (art.15.5 ADRIP), and the promotion of Indigenous systems and media of communication, including own radio and television programs (art.16.1 UNDRIP; art.14.3 ADRIP).

Hence, the true challenge will (continue to) be the implementation of these international standards at the grassroots level. Notwithstanding the abovementioned failures, some success stories also exist. In Canada, in 2015, the University of Winnipeg and Lakehead University in Thunder Bay (Ontario) introduced a [mandatory course on Indigenous history or culture](#) to graduate. Again, in Canada, the [Indigenous Languages Act](#) was adopted and entered into force last June. Radio programs are key, too: the successful [Indigenous Rights Radio](#) program launched by the NGO [Cultural Survival](#) has been hosted on 1,647 radio stations in 55 countries and in 35 languages so far. With regard to other media, the internet browser Mozilla Firefox, Mexican branch, offers its services in some of the Indigenous languages that are spoken in Mexico ([Mozilla Nativo](#)). Wikipedia also contains an increasing number of entries in Indigenous languages, for example, in [Aymara](#). And, besides the well-known [UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger](#), the non-profit organization [Endangered Alphabets Project](#) aims to preserve those writing systems, also found in forms of art and design, which may disappear in the near future.

Indeed, after this year, Indigenous languages need not be forgotten but rather further supported and safeguarded [from the global to the local](#) level. Indeed, international standards such as those provided for by ILO, the UN and the OAS, and initiatives such as the International Year of Indigenous Languages and the potential homonymous decade that may follow, are undoubtedly crucial, especially to provide States with rules and guidance to protect this immense cultural richness. At

the same time, local, private and civil society's actions and initiatives, such as those abovementioned, remain essential, particularly when States tend to turn a deaf ear to their international obligations.

Alexandra Tomaselli (PhD in Law) is a Senior Researcher at the Institute for Minority Rights of the European Academy of Bozen-Bolzano (Eurac Research), Italy, and a member of the International Law Association (ILA) and of its Committee on the Implementation of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

L. Mariana Olvera Colin holds a degree in Transcultural Communication from the University of Graz (Austria) and is currently finalizing her Masters in Global Studies at the same university.

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